

THE IBIS.

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XXIII.—*Five Weeks in the Peninsula of Florida during the Spring of 1861, with Notes on the Birds observed there.* By GEORGE CAVENDISH TAYLOR, F.R.G.S., F.Z.S., &c. (Part II.)

[Concluded from p. 142.]

ON the 6th of April I started at sunrise, with George Sheldon, in a small centre-board boat, to go to an island at the entrance of the Mosquito Lagoon, distant sixteen miles south of Smyrna, and reported to be a breeding-place for Pelicans. For some miles the channel is intricate and tortuous, among low marshy islands covered with mangroves, in which the only birds to be seen are White and Blue Herons and Pelicans. On the east bank is a large mound, consisting of sand, oyster and clam shells, which is supposed to have been thrown up by the Indians; part of it has been washed away, and it now forms a bluff, and is overgrown with vegetation. It is called "Turtle Mound." Sheldon has built a "turtle-house" there, as a station during the turtle-season, in the fall of the year. The animals are caught in long nets, and kept in "pens" or enclosures of stakes, until there is an opportunity of shipping them. Sheldon catches a good many and sells them at four and a half cents a pound to small vessels, which take them to Charleston and New York. In this river the turtles do not average over forty pounds each, but in Indian River they are much larger.

All day long there was a strong wind from the south-east. It took us six hours to get to the island, having to thrash to wind-

ward the whole way. The water was rough, and for an hour or more I was drenched with "spoon-drift." These small slip-keel boats are very wet, but are handy craft in a narrow river. The island to which we went is less than two acres in extent, flat and sandy, and but little above the level of the water. It is covered with a coarse weed which stands about a foot in height, and a few mangroves grow about high-water mark. As soon as I step on shore I kill a pair of Willets (*Symphemia semipalmata*) at one shot, and immediately afterwards a pair of Long-billed Curlews, right and left. These are the only Curlews I see; but the Willets are more plentiful, and all in pairs. There is not the least sign of Pelicans' nests. A few of these birds are on the island where we land, and a hundred or so are on a sand-bank near by. This is strange. Last year, about this time, Dr. Bryant visited this island, in company with George Sheldon, and got plenty of eggs, according to the account of the latter. The island was half covered with their nests, and it has been a breeding-station for them for years past. The island was overflowed by the tide last summer, and probably they may have left it on this account. There are other islands near, but no birds are upon them; and they do not usually make their nests on the mainland, where they would be exposed to the depredations of foxes, 'coons, and other animals. It is certainly time for them to be breeding. On Indian River young Pelicans were hatched weeks ago. There are some White Pelicans about here, but I did not see any.

The water in the lagoon is shallow, never over 7 or 8 feet in depth. I do not visit the other islands. The wind is too high to go any further to windward. There is no appearance of birds upon them, and Pelicans are visible at a great distance. There being nothing to stay for, we hoist the sail and make the run home in three hours. Two or three times we run bump against Saw-fish. It feels as if the boat had run upon a sand-bank; but the splashing of the animal soon indicates what it is. These fish are from 12 to 14 feet long, including the saw. They bask near the surface of the water, and show good sport for a harpoon. When struck they go off at a great pace, towing the boat after them. I am told that when an Alligator is hooked or

speared, and the line hauled in, he shows fight, and tries to climb into the boat.

Three miles from Smyrna there is a small mangrove-covered islet much frequented by *Ardeida*. George Sheldon said that they bred there, and that we should find some nests. We land and get up to our knees in mud, but without result. As yet I have seen no signs of birds breeding about Smyrna, except Eagles and Fish-Hawks. Further south the birds, no doubt, nest much earlier than they do up here.

Willetts are plentiful about Smyrna. Two examples which I skinned are so entirely dissimilar in size and plumage as to appear to be of two distinct species. I took them to the Smithsonian Institution at Washington, but Professor Baird gave it as his opinion that they were merely varieties of the same species, caused by age. I adhere to my previously formed opinion for the following reasons, which I conceive to be conclusive, even setting aside the difference of size and plumage. Both varieties are common, either in parties or pairs. I never saw them intermixed, but always separate. The pair which I shot this morning were of the ordinary type of *Symphemia semipalmata*, as were all the others about the island. The larger variety was also plentiful on the river; but if the two happened to be feeding together on the mud-banks, they separated on rising*.

April 8.—Out in the morning for my last trip to Smyrna, and returned unsuccessful. I have certainly been unlucky here. In the first place, Sheldon has been so constantly in attendance in

* Mr. Taylor has shown me his specimens, and there are, I must say, considerable differences in the two birds. As far as I can tell without examination of a large series of specimens, I should be inclined to consider them distinct. The larger variety seems to have already been called by Cuvier *Totanus speculiferus* (Règn. An. ed. 2, i. p. 531; Pucheran, Rev. et Mag. de Zool. 1851, p. 369), and should therefore be termed *Symphemia speculifera*. The dimensions of the species, as compared with *S. semipalmata*, are as follows, in inches and decimal parts:—

	Long. tota.	Alæ.	Rostr. à rictu.	Tarsi.
S. speculifera...	15	8·0	2·7	2·85
S. semipalmata	14	8·0	2·35	2·35

—ED.

his capacity as pilot on the live-oak vessels, endeavouring to get them to sea, that I could not persuade him to go on a hunt anywhere for more than a few hours. The wind having been invariably east raises such a surf on the bar that some of these vessels have been waiting for weeks to get over, and may have to remain some time longer. His son George, whom I had intended to have engaged to take me down Indian River with his boat and tent, was away with the two Englishmen, H. and L., and only returned a few days ago to start off again today in search of a doctor for a sick man in the house, who afterwards died. The coloured man, Bill, a very good cook and camp servant, who was also away with H. and L., was engaged as soon as he returned to attend upon the sick man, or I should have taken him. So I could do nothing but potter about the house. It is now too late to go down Indian River, for there the birds have done breeding. Mosquitoes are vigorous, and the weather is very hot. Winter is the time for this locality; one can then combine shooting, fishing, and bird-collecting. Wild Ducks of various kinds, which have now gone north, are then plentiful. Drum and Sheepshead, two excellent fishes, may be caught in quantities, to say nothing of the superior sport of spearing Saw-fishes and Alligators.

I shall now try my luck further north, for there is nothing more to be done hereabouts. I must say that Sheldon's is a satisfactory place to stay at. There is a never-failing supply of fresh fish, oysters, turtle, venison, wild turkey, &c.; and the house is far more comfortable than many large hotels I have been at in both Europe and America of immense pretensions and charges to match. At Sheldon's I meet with the greatest civility, and the charges are exceedingly moderate. A very pleasant custom prevails here. On each side of the house is a small altar of stone; on one or the other, according to the direction of the wind, a camp-fire is built up every night at dark. The smoke keeps off mosquitoes and sand-flies, and the fire dispels the gloom and gives a cheerful aspect to the locality.

For further particulars respecting the birds of this locality, I must refer the reader to Dr. Bryant's notes on the Birds of East Florida, in the 'Proceedings of the Boston Society of Natural

History,' vol. vii. There is no better authority on the subject than Dr. Bryant. I give a few extracts from his letters to me:—

“The most interesting things to be looked for in the bird line in Florida are the eggs of the Scolopaceous Courlan, and a small Burrowing Owl found in the interior near Indian River. The former is abundant only, as far as my knowledge extends, on the St. John's and tributary waters between Lake George and Lake Monroe, particularly on Spring Garden Lake; and next to this at the Wekira, a small stream entering from the westward, some thirty miles from Lake Monroe. * * * Down Indian River you can procure plenty of Pelicans, white and brown; the *Ardea ludoviciana*; *Egretta candidissima*; *Herodiæ pealii*, *rufescens*, *virescens*, *gardeni*, *violacea*; *Ibis alba*; *Platalea ajaja*; a good many Ducks, if you do not arrive too late for them; *Tachypetes aquila*; *Carbo floridanus*, &c.; also *Cyanocitta floridana*, a very rare bird even in collections in this country. * * * There are some birds, common enough, the eggs of which I never succeeded in getting, such as the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, which would be a most important acquisition to science, and a most ornamental and curious egg, *never likely to be common*, and growing rarer every year as the bird does. * * * The great heronry is on Indian River. Though the difference of latitude is small, there is a great difference in the time that the same species of bird deposits its eggs at Smyrna and at Indian River. The true tropical fauna seems to commence at Cape Canaveral, south of which they seldom or never have frost. The more tropical birds, and the greater part of the Herons, breed by the middle of March.”

I may as well mention that I could hear nothing of the Burrowing Owl: no one with whom I spoke appeared to know the bird.

April 9.—I start early to return to Enterprise; I see nothing on the way except a few Sandhill Cranes, and some very fine full-plumaged White-headed Eagles, with a number of Black Vultures assembled round the carcass of a calf. The road passes close to Lake Ashby. While resting the horses, I walk down to the lake, and see several Alligators swimming like dogs a few yards from the shore. I had some idea of remaining for a week

at Enterprise ; but when I reach the hotel, I find that a county court is being held, which will last some days, and the hotel and settlement, such as it is, being crowded with "crackers" and farmers, I decide upon continuing my journey, and accordingly go on board the 'Darlington,' which is to start next morning at daylight. As soon as it gets dusk, I hear the Chuck-Will's-Widow calling loudly. This bird is not found in this latitude during winter, and has not long arrived.

April 10.—Soon after the steamer has left Lake Monroe and has arrived in the narrow river, we see a flock of Turkeys on the right bank, consisting of a "gobbler" and a few hens. Captain Brock and several others have their rifles ready, and blaze away at them, unfortunately wounding the "gobbler." This I consider shameful destruction, and unsportsmanlike in the extreme. Brock said he would stop the boat for a Deer, and points out places where he has killed them. The day being rather cold, with a strong breeze, is unfavourable for Alligators,¹ and there are not so many as usual to be seen basking on the banks. As there are plenty of rifles ready to fire at every one that shows, some three or four are killed. The rifles used are the small American pea-rifles of a calibre from 80 to 100, and I am astonished to see how effective they are when loaded with a conical ball. An Alligator badly wounded, but not killed at once, makes a tremendous splashing in the water.

Just before entering Lake George, two "gunners" (American term for shooters) fire at an Alligator, fully fourteen feet long, which is sleeping on the bank quite clear of the water. The shots tell with good effect. The beast scrambles in, then turns on his back, splashing and kicking with his legs in the air, and showing his white belly. Another well-placed shot would have killed him, but, as it is, he recovers and dives. What becomes of him I do not know, for the steamer soon leaves him in the distance. One of the gunners shoots an unfortunate Fish-Hawk while bearing a fish to its nest. It drops the fish, falls in the woods, and perishes uselessly. These shooters were on the watch to fire at anything that showed itself within distance. On several parts of the river I saw (both going and returning) a good number—some thirty or forty—of the Scolopaceous Courlan,

which they call here "Limkins." They were wild, having doubtless been frequently shot at, and would not let the steamer approach them, but rose at a distance and flew into the thick reeds which fringe the edge of the water. Anhingas were very plentiful not far from Pilatka. I was pleased to see eight Swallow-tailed Kites (four of them together) soaring over the woods which cover the banks of the river. Luckily they did not come near enough for a shot from the gunners. They are beautiful birds, and most graceful in their movements.

On board the 'Darlington' were three gentlemen from Savannah, who had arrived at Smyrna a week before I did. They went down Indian River, and crossed overland to Lake Washington, near the head of the St. John's, a distance of six miles, which they walked, taking their things over in an ox-cart. They came down the St. John's River to Enterprise in a small boat, a reputed distance of two hundred miles. They had had good sport fishing, but had met with very little game and not many birds, and no Parroquets. They had seen a few "Limkins," and shot one; they had also shot a Black-necked Stilt.

At most of the landings where the steamer stops, venison is put on board to be conveyed north. Of course the facilities of communication greatly contribute towards promoting the destruction of the Deer, especially as these animals are shot all the year round. I have already mentioned the long pendent moss which hangs from nearly all the trees in the southern States of America*. When green, it is eaten by cattle. It is also used for stuffing mattresses and cushions. For this purpose it is soaked in water until the green bark or rind is rotted off, when the inner part remains black and crisp, and in outward appearance somewhat resembles curled horsehair. It is an air-plant, and in this climate will live if hung up anywhere. Wherever it grows in great abundance the spot is sure to be unhealthy. The trees in the pine-barrens are free from it, but in the swampy spots it grows luxuriantly. I have compared this moss with some of the Spanish moss which I brought from Jamaica, and find it entirely different: it is much coarser and longer.

* This is not really a moss, but a flowering plant of the natural order *Bromeliaceæ*—the *Tillandsia usneoides*.—ED.

The 'Darlington' remains all night at Pilatka, and I stay on board. The night is very hot and close, and mosquitoes are very troublesome. We are also much inconvenienced by what they call here "blind mosquitoes," which appear to be flying ants. They come in clouds, sometimes in such quantities as to put out a fire. They are attracted by a light, and the steamer is full of them. They do not bite, but from their numbers are very annoying.

Next morning the 'Darlington' proceeded on her voyage. I landed at my old quarters at Orange-Mills, where I remained for ten days. For several days following there was a heavy thunder-storm every afternoon, which saturated the ground, and made the bushes so wet as to restrict my bird-collecting considerably.

One day I went with a party to fish in "Deep Creek," a tributary of the St. John's. It is narrow, clothed with forest to the water's edge, and not much frequented. As we did not arrive until ten o'clock, the sun was so hot as to make walking rather unpleasant work. I spent some time in a dense swamp full of large cypress-trees, apparently a very favourable locality for Ivory-billed and Pileated Woodpeckers; but I saw nothing but some Grey Squirrels, which are common enough everywhere. On the trees overhanging the stream were a few Anhingas. I saw a few Alligators, but they are shy hereabouts, being constantly persecuted. On leaving the swamp I observed a pair of Swallow-tailed Kites soaring aloft, but the chance of their coming within shot was small indeed; so, being somewhat tired, I took to the boat to see if the fishing would bring more luck, always keeping my gun ready for a shot. While thus engaged, I saw the Swallow-tailed Kites coming nearer, and gliding just clear of the tops of the trees, where, no doubt, they find a good supply of lizards, tree-frogs, and insects. At last one came within shot, and I killed it. On opening it the next day, I found the crop full of half-digested lizards and small snakes. Whenever I have seen these birds, they have always been in pairs, gliding over the tree-tops, near to the water. I have no doubt that they breed in this part of Florida. A resident with a moderate amount of energy would have no great difficulty in finding their nests; but the arduous task would be to get at

them when found. They probably breed in swamps, at or near the top of a lofty cypress with a bole far too thick for a man to encircle, perfectly smooth, and without a branch for fifty or sixty feet from the ground. It would then rest with you either to devise some means to get up yourself, or (what would be far more difficult) to induce a negro to undertake this task, and to teach him how to set about it. The probability is, that the young birds would be hatched and flown before you had succeeded in reaching the nest.

The fishing was tolerably successful. The baits used were living or dead fishes. A good number of various species of Perch were caught—blue, red-bellied, and black. The latter attain a weight of four or five pounds, and are called “Trout.” All were beautiful fish and good for the “pan,” as the term in use here expresses it. We lit a camp-fire and cooked them, and they proved excellent. The waters of Florida abound with fish, and the varieties seem to be endless. The Cat-fishes (*Pimelodes*) are generally dispersed over the North American continent, both in fresh and salt water. I recollect catching them on the Pacific coast of Central America; and they abound in Florida, and are often of a large size. While the ‘Darlington’ was lying at Pilatka, I saw a man hook one which must have weighed 20 pounds. It was like a rock on the line. He hauled it up to the surface, but lost it in trying to lift it out. These fishes are in little estimation for the “pan,” though the negroes eat them. The negroes, however, are not particular, and no doubt a Cat-fish is as good as a “’possum.”

It came on to rain heavily as soon as we had finished our meal. The storm lasted nearly two hours. We then got home just in time to escape another storm, which set in about sunset and lasted well into the night. The next day I obtained a specimen of Bonaparte’s Gull, which I shot while it was running along the shore of the river. About the 16th of April Night-Hawks appeared; they were plentiful and easily obtained. They fly about like swallows an hour or two before sunset. I often saw twenty or thirty together. In my notes on the Birds of Honduras (‘Ibis,’ vol. ii. p. 114), under the head of “*Nyctidromus*,” I mention seeing some hundreds of birds hunting moths in the evening.

From subsequent experience I feel certain that the birds seen on that occasion were not *Nyctidromi*, but either Night-Hawks or some birds very similar to them. The Night-Hawks are common even as far north as Quebec, where I observed them towards the end of September: they are commonly known by the name of "Bull-Bats." Red-bellied and Red-cockaded Woodpeckers were common about Orange-Mills, and easily obtained. I searched closely for Florida Jays, but never met with them. I showed the bird to several persons, and they were not acquainted with it, nor did they even recollect having seen one before.

I made an excursion for some miles into the "piny woods" east of the St. John's River, but found very little to reward me. I killed a fine specimen of the Blue Heron, and a Black Squirrel, a male—the largest I ever saw, fully as large as a half-grown cat. Although the prevailing colour is black, it is also distinctly marked with red and grey. I saw a single flock of ten or a dozen Parroquets, and next day went again to the same locality in search of them, but without success. I have never met with these birds twice in the same place, and it seems to be mere chance to meet with them at all. I was told by an old resident in Florida, who had served during the Indian war, that formerly they were plentiful about the Indian villages. But that is all changed now. All the Indians, except some twenty or thirty, have been removed from Florida, and the Parroquets have considerably diminished. The Chuck-Will's-Widow was tolerably common at Orange-Mills; but the difficulty of obtaining this bird may be known by the fact, that I was out fourteen or fifteen evenings before I obtained one, and then had to shoot when the bird was so close that the plumage was much damaged by the shot. An evening or two later I killed two, one of which I was unable to find. The other fell among a thick brake of saw-palmettos, and I could not find it until next morning. The Chuck-Will's-Widows fly low, and sit on rails, stumps of trees, and other low places, which increases the difficulty of seeing them in the dusk of the evening. If they roost on the ground in the daytime, they might probably be hunted up with dogs. I saw no signs whatever of small birds nesting up to the time I left Orange-Mills.

By the 18th of April I had pretty well used up this locality,

and was meditating a trip to Cedar Keys, on the Gulf of Mexico, which is easily accessible by the lately constructed railroad from Fernandina. There I hoped to have found fresh varieties of birds, or at least that some of those already seen would prove to be more plentiful. But the news of the capture of Fort Sumter delayed my departure; and when, three days later, I heard of the secession of Virginia, the burning of the navy-yard at Norfolk, and the capture of the armoury at Harper's Ferry, with the probable interruption of the mails and means of communication, I thought it advisable to move northwards while I could. Accordingly I closed my ornithological campaign in Florida, and returned to Baltimore the same way that I came.

In three months I could do great things in Florida, both in birds and eggs. Five weeks is too short a time, especially when one goes as a stranger and has to learn all the localities. My experience teaches me (and Florida affords no exception) that it is necessary to go to a place once to know how to go to it a second time; for the reports and information of others are but of secondary utility, as no two persons' experience is alike. I should like to be in Florida from December until the middle of May, before which one should not leave. The climate is then delicious and perfectly healthy, and during that time there is nothing to be done in the northern States.

XXIV.—*Further note on the Eggs of Vultur auricularis and Aquila audax.* By J. H. GURNEY.

THE second volume of 'The Ibis' contains, in page 171, a notice of the eggs laid in the years 1859 and 1860 by a Vulture in my collection, of the great South African species, *Vultur auricularis* of Daudin. This bird has since laid two more eggs, being in all four eggs in four successive years, and at the following dates:—15th of February, 1859; 23rd of February, 1860; 20th of February, 1861; and 26th of February, 1862.

The character and colouring of all these eggs are similar, the ground being white, and the markings rufous, varying in extent and in intensity, but chiefly aggregated at the obtuse end of the egg.